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Drawn to the Gods: Religion and Humor in the Simpsons, South Park, and Family Guy. By David Feltmate. N.Y.: New York University Press. 282 p.

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Drawn to the Gods: Religion and Humor in the Simpsons, South Park, and Family Guy. By David Feltmate. New York: New York University Press, 2017. Pp. 282. \$89.00 (cloth); \$28.00 (paper).

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Religion, humor, and popular culture meet in David Feltmate's *Drawn to the Gods*, a book that takes in several relevant perspectives in view of contemporary American religiosity. Feltmate's object of analysis – the satirical, animated, well-known TV shows *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy* – are unavoidable to anyone browsing different channels in the sphere of Western media. Feltmate offers a wide-ranging scholarly approach to these animated sitcoms through mainly qualitative analyses. His primary sources are extensive, drawing on almost 1,000 episodes from the 2014 and 2015 seasons that contain references to religion(s). In fact, many episodes were classified specifically by Feltmate as "religion episodes."

The result of this undertaking is a multilayered, learned, and nuanced analysis in which the author's findings are discussed in the light of earlier, generally scholarly, comments and insights, American religion in statistical and usually contemporary historical perspective, and also theological study. Across several chapters (e.g., "Sacred Centers," "The Difference Race Makes," "American Christianity Part 1: Backward Neighbors" and "American Christianity Part 2: American Christianities as Dangerous Threats," "Stigma, Stupidity, and Exclusion") the author discusses different facets of religious and spiritual seeking, the rejection of institutional religion, race and culture, the emerging American religious landscape, missionary activities, money, sexual ethics, and the supposed dangers of religious political activities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, popular animated sitcoms could be seen as charged with critiques of institutional religion and, simultaneously, also with spiritual questioning. This duality is accompanied by disparagement and sometimes shockingly brutal mockery.

As a significant concept, Feltmate invokes the notion of "ignorant familiarity," a useful expression that describes the superficial, poorly educated, yet often self-sure understanding of the outsider on religious and cultural matters. Much of the book

actually seems to analyze prejudice and the lack of understanding of religious and cultural phenomena. The finest points of the book appear as the writer turns his analytical view away from the sacred under attack and toward the notion of the sacred that arises from the sitcoms and their more or less implicit values. What is sacred to the characters and producers of these shows, and how does that sacredness motivate attacks toward the allegedly defiled and meaningless, if not harmful, institutional religions?

As a critical point about the use of scholarly concepts, the reader sometimes ponders whether the notion of ignorant familiarity is occasionally used too eagerly to describe the attitudes and inclinations of people in religious matters. In view of the complex, multilayered reality of religious activities, familiarity can be ignorant yet simultaneously heartwarming, curious, and even creative, since religion seems to be about things other than knowledge – a profoundly Protestant notion. Another issue in the book I wondered about is the concept of spirituality, which is used in the analysis sometimes with different meanings and without proper introduction (e.g., the comment on p. 11 is, in my view, too shallow). Is spirituality something separate from religious traditions and practices or is the relationship between the two more complicated? However, the writer courageously makes efforts to define essential concepts (including the notoriously difficult core term “religion”) in the introductory part of the book.

Altogether, the book offers a great introduction into the scholarly study of religion in a society and its prominent forms of popular culture. The goal of the research was to introduce theory on religious satire and to answer the following research questions: “What do you have to believe about different groups classified as ‘religions’ and the role of ‘religion’ in society to find jokes in the three sitcoms humorous?” “What do the patterns in these programmes tell us about the popular construction of ‘religion’s’ significance in America?” and even “What can critical assessment of religion in the public sphere through popular culture tell us about American civil life?” (p.2) These relatively complicated questions were skillfully encountered, and the answers were found in the spheres of social and cultural structures and phenomena, where religion ultimately appears as a power play.

Simultaneously, certain perspectives were left unexplored. The title *Drawn to the Gods*, promises more – specifically regarding the appeal or lure of religion and spirituality. One could expect the lure of gods potentially emerge more as the reverse side of the coin. The theological-philosophical aspect of the research could, moreover, grow deeper specifically in view of the critics of the different religious anthropomorphisms so obviously under attack in the sitcoms. Making God appear in terms of human perception and cognition obviously charges these notions and visualizations with critiques of negation. The problem is age old: the scandal of idolatry understood as and a root for historical iconoclasm. In the end, one could also ponder more the position of potential self-satire in which the “ignorant viewer” can find oneself. Who is laughing to whom?

Moreover, the sitcoms could be further set into additional analytical frameworks. It is feasible to ask whether they could also be interpreted to expose and reiterate modernist dualities in understanding the inner and outer, private and communal, and even matter and spirit. In this regard, religious satire appears also as practical modifications of these divisions. Cut out of their essential networks of conceptual-material relations, any religious concept or activity certainly appears to be odd or even ridiculous on the dissection table of modernity. Could the programs be interpreted as finding their edge of satire also from these positions?

In all of these aspects, David Feltmate’s book on religion, satire, and popular culture must be regarded a significant, fascinating, and also a thought-provoking scholarly introduction into the world of contemporary religious popular culture and its study. The book is well composed, and it offers a multifaceted, yet compact package of knowledge and insight. It is a must read for all researchers of contemporary religious communication and popular culture.